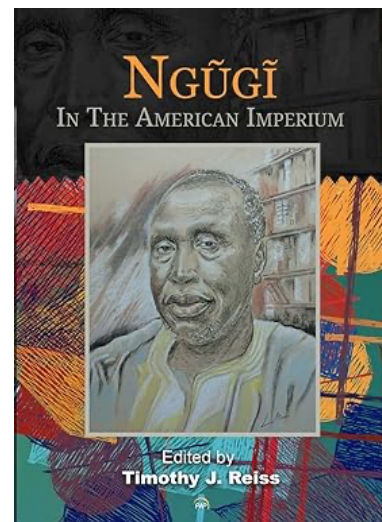


Ngugi and I: A Personal Tribute

by

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The great Ngugi wa Thiong'o has passed <https://lnkd.in/gecNjFKx>
<https://lnkd.in/gt5U3VaX> As a student in my native Sierra Leone, at a time when the literature curriculum was decidedly Anglocentric, crowded with the British canon, with only a smattering of African texts and writers, Ngugi is one of the figures who made me fall in love with African literature. I avidly read his early novels in secondary school in Freetown and it was from *Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) that I first learned about Kenya (rural life and culture, traditional and western education, colonization, the Mau-Mau and anti-colonial struggle). From those early works onwards Ngugi became a towering figure of African literature, recognized world-wide. As Richard Lea and Sian Cain (28 May, 2025) note in their tribute to him in *The Guardian* newspaper, “Considered a giant of the modern African pantheon, he had been a favourite for the Nobel prize in literature for many years.”

And much later, when I tried to write about African cultural studies as a PhD in education student in Canada, Ngugi's work in general and especially the collective play co-written with Ngugi wa Miiri, '*Ngaahika Ndeenda*' ('*I will marry when I want*') and the activist work of the Kamirithu Centre (Kitata, 2025) in his home village of Limuru from which the play emerged, were instrumental in my articulation of what African cultural studies could be. The result was my doctoral dissertation (and after, my first book) in which I argued for a paradigm shift from a hegemonically aesthetics based English Literature in Africa to a more complex, aesthetic and utilitarian African cultural studies: *A Prescience of African Cultural Studies: The Future of Literature in Africa is Not What it Was*.

As much as I loved Ngugi's fiction, I came to admire him even more and to utilize what he produced as a most passionate postcolonial theorist and political and cultural critic. The perhaps lesser-known collection, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* became a favourite because the essays were particularly valuable for my articulation of African cultural studies (Wright, 1995). Ngugi is most famous for *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, a work that crossed over from African thought to become a staple of global postcolonial/decolonial thought. It epitomized what became his lifelong anti-colonial stance and work on the politics of language. Indeed, Ngugi is famous for eschewing the colonizer's language, English as the medium for his creative writing and even the colonizer's Christian name, "James" (his early novels were published under the name James Ngugi). He opted instead to write in his mother tongue, Kikuyu and to only translate works into English if and when he chose to. So, for example, in 1980 Kikuyu readers got to read *Caitani Mutharabaini*, which he initially wrote on toilet paper while imprisoned. It was two years later that others got to read the work when he translated and published it in English in 1982 as *Devil on the Cross*. Ngugi advocated that African writers write in their mother tongue and at a stretch in regional languages such as Swahili – the lingua franca in much of Eastern Africa. He also chose to use his Kikuyu

name and naming, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Ngugi, son/child of Thiong'o) and insisted everyone refer to him simply as Ngugi.

As a fierce critic of corruption in successive Kenyan governments, Ngugi's works were censored and he was imprisoned (which he wrote about in *Barrel of a Pen* and *Detained*) and upon his release, with the threat of assassination looming, he spent the rest of his life in exile, briefly in the UK, then mostly in the USA (as a professor successively at Yale, Northwestern, New York University, ending his career as Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at University of California, Irvine). Not just a Kenyan nationalist, Ngugi was in fact a devoted, lifelong pan-Africanist, and later in life became very interested in Indigenous thought and global critical politics, as evidenced in works like *Globaletics*, his coinage of the particularly utilitarian notion of "poor theory," his insistence on and continuous forging of links between the local and the global (including of glocal Indigeneity), and his exhortation that since it was European colonizers who carved out the continent's "countries," Africans should free themselves from what he identified as "the straightjackets of nationalism."

One never thinks they will actually get to meet their intellectual heroes so I was beside myself with excitement when Ngugi was invited to give the keynote address at the 2007 conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and I (African, new to UBC, recovering English major, and newly minted Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Comparative Cultural Studies) was asked to give the response to his address. After his talk and my response, Ngugi made some excuse about needing rest and asked me to leave the conference venue with him (leaving behind a very disappointed gaggle of high-profile scholars who were obviously intent on rubbing shoulders with the esteemed keynote speaker). Rather than going back to his accommodations, he actually wanted me to walk the campus with him, including a stop at the bookstore (which, to my relief, carried some of his works). We had the longest talk about individual African countries, pan-African politics and the responsibilities of Africans in

the diaspora to the continent. I remember being astonished that he displayed in-depth knowledge of the history of and current issues in my native Sierra Leone. It felt like a dream to have this long chat with Ngugi as we walked the campus then sat outside his digs, with students walking briskly, blissfully by. I wanted to shout- "Can you see who I am with, who is talking and laughing with me? Can you believe it?"

The next time I met Ngugi in person, we were both on an invited plenary panel of the Postcolonial Education Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in San Diego in 2009, where he greeted me as one would a long-lost brother, with a big grin and a long hug. Perhaps I can be forgiven for not remembering the details of any of the presentations, swept up as I was by the very presence of the man and my astonishment at his very genuine modesty. From my experiences with him at the conference at UBC and again at AERA (and from accounts from others), Ngugi revealed himself to be a most modest and down-to-earth person, always very keen to hear from and engage others, as if his much-anticipated talks were simply an excuse to meet and learn about and from others. When he missed out on the Nobel in 2010 to Peruvian author, Mario Vargas Llosa, the modest Ngugi was less disappointed than the photographers who had gathered outside his home in anticipation of his win. "I was the one who was consoling them!" he reportedly said (Lea & Cain, 2025).

And finally, and in the most sustained way, I interacted with Ngugi (albeit via Zoom meetings) when I was invited by Tim Reiss (literary scholar and Ngugi's colleague at UC Irvine), to contribute to an edited collection of essays about Ngugi and his relationship to and reception in the Americas, *Ngugi in the American Imperium*. Perhaps not surprisingly, I chose to explore what it might mean to take up Ngugi seriously in the politics of (re)articulating both an American and a global cultural studies (Wright, 2021). What was particularly thrilling for me about the project was that Ngugi himself was part of the collective- present at every Zoom meeting, enthusiastically engaging everyone's drafts, and encouraging us to critique his own essay. This was

truly a labour of love for us and I consider that essay particularly important because it was a small contribution to a project that was so meaningful; a rigorous celebration of a towering figure who adamantly refused to be so identified. The pictures I have taken with Ngugi over the years have always been quite meaningful to me. With his passing, they have now become some of my most treasured images. To a fearless, radical social justice theorist and activist, avid pan-Africanist, and passionate advocate for global equity and representation of the marginalized I say, “Mzee! Wakai Awa! Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Rest in Power!”

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